

American generosity surprises Japanese student

Thousands of miles from her home at ground zero of the earthquake and tsunami, Wakana's host family provides aid and comfort.

By Marcia Meredith

This past school year, Wakana Yoshida was a 16-year-old foreign exchange student from Fukushima, Japan. Under ordinary circumstances, that would be fairly unremarkable. Exchange students and programs, particularly from the Far East, are nearly routine in area high schools.

But On March 11, she was in class at North Meck High School when she learned that a 9.0 magnitude earthquake, tsunami and nuclear crisis left her hometown in ruins.

On a classroom television, she and her peers watched terrifying news reports about the resulting

devastation. Fukushima, home to her parents, friends and two beloved cats, was ground zero for one of the world's worst natural disasters.

A huddle of supporters surrounded Yoshida. Her host family "sister," Michele Salpietra, left a nearby classroom to be by her side. A caring teacher loaned Yoshida a long distance calling card so she could connect to a loved one in Japan.

"It was really scary," recalls Yoshida. "I called, e-mailed and sent text messages to my parents and friends, but no one answered." Her attempts at communications on Skype and Facebook also went unanswered.

Yoshida had not been home since August 2010. She came to America as a participant of Rotary International's Youth Exchange program. The Rotary Club of Lake Norman-Huntersville is her local sponsor. Stephanie Bradley, Yoshida's counselor and mentor from the local chapter, also saw media stories about the catastrophic wreckage and widespread loss of life that occurred on the island nation.

"When I saw the news, I froze," said Bradley, a 34-year-old Cornelius resident. "I left work early so I could be there for Wakana. I could not let her be alone."

Yoshida was dismissed from school early so she could continue attempts to reach her family from the Salpietra's residence, her Huntersville host family. Added Bradley, "All we could do is pray and make Wakana feel safe."



Yoshida

Information began to slowly trickle in, mostly about her friends but not her family. After an agonizing, 24-hour wait, a communication from her parents finally arrived. Via e-mail, Yoshida's mother wrote, "Our house is okay. But everything is broken. School is broken. Roads are broken. We are scared."

She also learned that her cats, Chocolate and Cookie, survived.

While the Yoshida family and pets were unscathed, her hometown was not. Toxic nuclear waste from a nearby nuclear power plant that had been severely damaged poisoned the air and water. The smell of human decay was palpable. Houses were swept out to sea. Yoshida said when her mom went to a nearby city for help, several people shunned her as they feared they would be exposed to radiation.

Yoshida's mother urged her to seek support not for the family, but for her city. Heeding her mother's call, she sent Bradley a text message which implored, "Please help me help my country. You will help me, right?"

Rotarians live by the club's motto, "Service Above Self." True to that mission, Bradley said, "My immediate response was 'yes.' Wakana's family is our family. When devastation happens and people need us, Rotarians are there."

In addition to launching a Japanese relief fund, Bradley and other Rotarians assembled a care package of necessities for the Yoshidas, including beef jerky for Mr. Yoshida and pet food for the family's cats.

At a local Rotary meeting hosted at NorthStone Country Club, an e-mail from Mrs. Yoshida was read aloud before the customary "Pass the Hat for Health and Happiness" portion of the event. The communication poignantly and plainly illustrated the earthquake's lethal destruction.

"We raised \$600. Members were throwing in 50- and 100-dollar bills," recalls Rotarian Chris Jones, past president of the club and District 7680 Governor for 2012-13. "Wakana's parents do not want the money. Rather, they said to give it to someone in Japan who really needs it."

The Rotary Club went on to raise several thousand dollars for the relief fund.

Students at North Mecklenburg High School quickly united for Yoshida, too. Host family sister Michele, a senior, showed the e-mail from Mrs. Yoshida to her school advisor. Moved by the selfless plea for help, school officials granted special permission to immediately launch a school-wide fundraiser.

"Wakana appeared in a television announcement that aired on the school's *Viking News Network*. She spoke in Japanese. English subtitles were included," says Salpietra. "She shared how the earthquake affected her family, and in turn, how it affected her. Students really connected to Wakana's message."

Following the broadcast, students raised \$400 in two hours during several lunch periods. Milk jugs that

Want to help?

Funds continue to be collected to assist those in Wakana Yoshida's hometown of Fukushima, Japan. Write checks to The Rotary Club of Lake Norman-Huntersville, c/o Wakana Yoshida Fund, P.O. Box 2306, Huntersville, NC 28078.

were fashioned for fund collection overflowed with bills and coins.

"Wakana saw the money and started crying. She was so happy and said, 'Americans are so generous,'" Salpietra says. Additional relief funds also were raised at another school event.

Surprising kindness

Prior to the earthquake, Yoshida had been experiencing a quintessential taste of American life at North Meck. Active in a variety of clubs, Yoshida was one of 17 girls among more than 100 who qualified to be on the school dance team. Trips to various cities including Boston and New York marked her stay, as well as typical teenage activities such as going shopping, watching movies and attending two senior proms with friends.

The effervescent teen arrived last summer knowing very little English, but by Christmas she began, "dreaming of her Japanese friends, but in English." Yoshida acknowledged that she now "thinks in English," a hallmark that indicates the beginning mastery of a second language.

After the earthquake hit, Yoshida witnessed America's penchant for compassion. While she said she knew American people were kind, she said, "I now know that they are *really* nice!"

Throughout the traumatic events over the past few months, Yoshida demonstrated unwavering dignity. "Wakana has handled herself beautifully, with poise. She is really a great kid," says Bradley. While living the Rotary motto comes naturally to Bradley, she adds, "It took a 16-year-old kid to show me what our motto really means."

This weekend, Yoshida will graduate from North Meck. Before she returns home to Japan, she will visit the western United States with other Rotary Youth International students from Brazil, Germany, Ecuador and other countries.

Yoshida will return home with many fond memories.

"The exchange program has been wonderful," she reflected. Moved by the outpouring of support she has received from strangers across Huntersville and beyond, she added, "If America has an earthquake, I will help them."